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The Ladder of Jacob

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One of the strangest texts to be included in recent collections of biblical pseudepigrapha is that known as the *Ladder of Jacob*.¹ Known only from the Slavonic *Tolkovaya Paleya*, this text elaborates on the story of Jacob's dream at Bethel in Gen 28:11–22, adding details to the vision described there and containing a prayer and angelic revelation nowhere present in the biblical narrative. It is clear that the Slavonic text is a translation from Greek; it appears likely to me that the Greek is itself a translation from an original Aramaic or Hebrew text dating from, roughly speaking, the Second Temple period.²

¹This work is found in an eclectic translation by Horace Lunt (based on published texts and several unpublished manuscripts) in *OTP* 2. 401–12; a translation by A. Pennington of two published recensions of the *Ladder of Jacob* is found in Hedley F. D. Sparks, ed., *The Apocryphal Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984) 453–63. Previously, a translation of the text had appeared in Montague Rhodes James, ed., *The Lost Apocrypha of the Old Testament* (New York: Macmillan, 1920) 96–103, based on Gottlieb N. Bonwetsch, "Die apokryphe 'Leiter Jakobs,'" *Nachrichten von der Königlichen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen* 1 (1900) 76–87. I am most grateful to Professor Lunt, my teacher in Slavonic, for having given me copies of the manuscripts used in the preparation of his translation. That translation has guided me throughout, and if I have deviated from it slightly here and there, these deviations are such as not to upset the talmudic axiom, "If Rabbi [Judah] did not teach it, from whom did R. Ḥiyya learn it?" (b. *Erubin* 92a).

²The connection between this text and rabbinic exegetical traditions are, in my opinion, striking. These do not preclude an original Greek composition for the *Ladder of Jacob*, but make that possibility somewhat less likely. Moreover, the Hebrew words that survive in transcription in the text, along with other elements to be discussed below, likewise point in

There are many mysterious elements in this text that I cannot explain. Horace Lunt's recent eclectic translation has clarified much; however, a number of difficulties remain, and the following is more in the nature of a preliminary exploration than a finished work. In what follows I would like to illustrate one area of overlap between this text's basic understanding of Jacob's dream and various rabbinic texts that deal with the same biblical narrative. Such an examination may lead to a better understanding of the purpose and origin of the *Ladder of Jacob*.

Jacob's dream-vision is presented in the opening verses of this text:

Jacob then went to Laban his uncle. He found a place and, laying his head on a stone, he slept there, for the sun had gone down. He had a dream. And behold, a ladder was fixed on the earth, whose top reached to heaven. And the top of the ladder was the face of a man, carved out of fire. There were twelve steps leading to the top of the ladder, and on each step to the top there were human faces, on the right and on the left, twenty-four faces including their chests. And the face in the middle was higher than all that I saw, the one of fire, including the shoulders and arms, exceedingly terrifying, more than those twenty-four faces.³

Somewhat later, in chapter 5, the angel Sariel descends to explain to Jacob the meaning of this vision:

Then he [the angel] said to me [Jacob]: "You have seen a ladder with twelve steps, each step having two human faces which kept changing their appearance. The ladder is this age, and twelve steps are the periods of this age, and the twenty-four faces are the kings of the lawless⁴ nations of this age. Under these kings the children of your children and the generations of your sons will be tested⁵; they [the foreign kings] will rise up because of the wickedness of your offspring. And they [the

the direction of a Hebrew or Aramaic original. See also my brief discussion of this text in *In Potiphar's House* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1990) 117–19.

³*Lad. Jac.* 1.1–6.

⁴*bezakonъnъ* (ἄνομος); the Greek word was frequently used by Hellenistic Jewish and Christian writers to describe foreign nations or individuals. In this respect, indeed, it was used in a way quite similar to ἄθεος ("godless") in the same literature; see BAG, s.v. ἄνομος. Hence, Lunt's translation of *bezakonъnъ* as ungodly, therefore, is the functional equivalent of ἄνομος. In the Septuagint, ἄνομος often translates the Hebrew עשׂר.

⁵In place of Lunt's translation "interrogated," we should probably read "tested" (Pennington [Sparks, *Apocryphal Old Testament*, 461] uses "tried"). The Slavonic *istezati* carries both meanings, and in context "tested" seems to make better sense. Tests in Second Temple writings were ordeals, long-term tribulations to be endured. See Jacob Licht, *Testing in the Hebrew Scriptures and Post-Biblical Judaism* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1973) 71–76 [Hebrew]. Alternately, this Slavonic root may mean something like "afflict" or "torture" (ταπεινώω, ꙗꙗ) as does its modern Russian cognate, истязать.

foreign kings] will make this place empty by four ascents because of⁶ the sins of your offspring. And upon the property of your forefathers a palace will be built, a temple in the name of your God and your fathers' [God], but in the anger against your children it will become deserted by the four ascents of this age.⁷

As in the biblical account, so here Jacob sees a ladder, but in this text the ladder is adorned with human faces, statues representing the “kings of the lawless nations of this age.” These kings, Jacob is told, will rise up against the wickedness of his descendants, and “this place,” apparently Bethel, will be made desolate by four ascents brought about by Jacob’s progeny. Needless to say, none of these dire predictions is found in the biblical account.

■ Ups and Downs

In order to understand these peculiarities in the *Ladder of Jacob*, it is best to begin with the biblical account itself. The story of Jacob’s dream-vision at Bethel was highly significant for ancient readers of the Bible; it marked the first time that God appeared to Jacob or addressed him directly and was thus the start, in a sense, of his career as one of God’s chosen servants. At the same time, this vision of Jacob’s was somewhat puzzling. Why, to begin with, had Jacob had a *dream* at all—why did not God simply speak to him directly, as he had to Abraham? Moreover, what was this dream intended to communicate? If the point had been merely to tell Jacob that “the land upon which you are lying I will give to you and your descendants” (Gen 28:13), there certainly would have been no need for a ladder with angels going up and down on it. Further, something about this dream obviously frightened Jacob, since verse 17 says, “And he was *afraid*, and he said, ‘How *fearful* is this place. . .’” What could be so frightening about a ladder with angels on it?

Pondering these questions, interpreters came to the conclusion that the ladder itself was some sort of symbolic message *about the future*, Jacob’s

⁶The word translated by Lunt as “against” here is indeed Slavonic *na* (meaning, if followed by the accusative, “onto” or “against”) but the sense cannot be that these kings will rise up *against* Israel’s iniquity but because of it. That is, God will allow these wicked kings to arise because of the sins of his people. (So similarly, two sentences later, the text explains that this site will become deserted “in the [divine] anger against your children”). Hebrew and Aramaic על can mean both “against” and “because of,” and this is probably the source of the error. More remotely, the original might have had נגד (כ), (“corresponding to”) a preposition that also means “against,” but in that case one would have expected the Slavonic to read *protivъ* and not *na*.

⁷*Lad. Jac.* 5.1–10; I have duplicated Lunt’s rendering of this phrase; for another possibility, see below, n. 9. On both passages see also Lunt’s translation and notes, *OTP* 2. 407, 409.

own or that of his descendants. Such an interpretation, for example, underlies the comment of Philo of Alexandria on this passage:

Perhaps as well [Jacob] caught a glimpse of his own [future] life in this visionary ladder. . . . The affairs of men are by their very nature comparable to a ladder because of their irregular course. For a single day (as someone well put it) can carry the person set on high downward and lift someone else upward, for it is the nature of none of us to remain in the same circumstances, but rather to undergo all manner of changes. . . . So the path of human affairs goes up and down, subjected to unstable and shifting happenstance.⁸

Thus, the ladder in the dream symbolizes for Philo the ups and downs that lie in store for Jacob (and which characterize human affairs in general). The idea that the ladder embodied a vision of the future seems to be shared by the *Ladder of Jacob*, in which the ladder is said to represent “this age” and the twelve steps its periods. Moreover, our text speaks specifically of four “ascents” (or “descents”)⁹ that will affect that site in time to come: here too, the reference seems to be to later history.

What are these four ascents/descents? The four empires presaged in the book of Daniel certainly come to mind.¹⁰ The theme of four empires (though not necessarily Daniel’s four) is also found in later Jewish writings of the period.¹¹ But the closest correspondent to the *Ladder of Jacob* here is a rabbinic explanation of Jacob’s vision which exists in several forms; the most widely attested is a remark attributed to R. Samuel b. Nahman (late third to fourth century CE):

And he dreamt that a ladder was set on the ground and its top reached to the heavens and the angels of God were going up and down on it. . . .
Said R. Samuel b. Nahman: Is it possible that these were the ministering angels [whose job it is to serve before God in Heaven]? Were they

⁸Philo *Som.* 1.150, 153–56.

⁹A number of manuscripts read *sxody*, “descents”; Lunt (*OTP* 2. 409 n. d) posits *v̄sxody*, “ascents.” Pennington (Sparks, *Apocryphal Old Testament*, 458, 461) translates “generations” but notes that the text literally reads “descents.”

¹⁰Dan 3:36–40; 7:3–27.

¹¹Rome is the fourth empire in 4 Ezra 12:11–36 and 2 Bar 39:2–6; see Michael Stone, *Fourth Ezra* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 361, 366. Mireille Hadas-Label, “Rome, quatrième empire,” in A. Caquot, et al., eds., *Hellenica et Judaica* (Louvain: Peeters, 1986) 297–312. Compare the four periods spoken of in 1 Enoch 89–90; also 4Q552 and 4Q553 (“Four Kingdoms ar”). On this theme in general see David Flusser, “The Four Empires in the Fourth Sibyl and in the Book of Daniel,” in idem, *Judaism and the Origins of Christianity* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1988) 317–44 and E. C. Lucas, “The Origin of Daniel’s Four Empires Scheme Reexamined,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 39 (1988) 185–202. Note also Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (7 vols.; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1909–38) 5. 223.

not instead the guardian angels of the nations of the world (שרי אומות) (העולם)?¹² He [God] showed him [Jacob] Babylon's angel climbing up seventy rungs and going down again. Then he showed him Media's angel going up and down fifty-two, and then Greece's going up and down one hundred and eighty. Then Rome's went up and up, and he [Jacob] did not know how many [rungs it would ascend]. Jacob took fright at this and said: Oh Lord, do you mean that this one has no descent? God said to him: Even if you see him reach the very heavens, I will still cause him to go down, as it is written, "Though you soar aloft like the eagle, though your nest is set among the stars, from there I will bring you down, says the Lord" [Obad 1:4].¹³

Now we can understand something more of the *Ladder of Jacob*, as well as gain insight into the development of this midrash of R. Samuel b. Nahman. The latter's point of departure is a relatively minor problem: if the angels in Jacob's dream were (as the biblical text calls them) the "angels of God"—presumably the highest class of angels, God's "ministering angels" as they are known in rabbinic literature—why were they going up and down the ladder rather than serving God in the loftiest regions of heaven? Added to this minor matter was the more basic question already mentioned, a question that in fact generated all manner of exegetical motifs:¹⁴ What was the symbolic message being given to Jacob by the sight of this ladder and the angels? For, to repeat, this dream was not intended merely to inform Jacob that the spot on which he had slept was, or was destined to become, sacred. There would have been no need of a ladder with angels for that. Moreover, why were the angels going *up and down*? Angels are said to reside in heaven; they should therefore more properly be said to go *down and up*.

Such is the background to R. Samuel b. Nahman's remark. He therefore begins by asserting that, despite the phrase "angels of God" in the biblical text, these angels were not in fact God's ministering angels, but the angelic "princes" of the nations mentioned in the book of Daniel,¹⁵ each of whom is assigned to watch over a different country or people. Their "ascending and descending" (in that order), therefore, had great significance: what Jacob saw was actually a visual representation of the rise and fall of empires, specifically, those foreign empires which were to dominate his own

¹²This notion of angelic guardians of different kingdoms is reflected in the book of Daniel (for example, Dan 10:13, 20).

¹³My emphasis. Versions of this midrash appear in *Exod. R.* 32.7, *Lev. R.* 29.2, *Tanhuma vayyese* 2; *Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana* 23 (ed. Bernard Mandelbaum; 2 vols.; Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1962) 334; *Midrash ha-Gadol* Gen. 28:12; *Midrash Ps.* 78.6; *Yalqut Shim'oni vayyese* 121; *Yalqut Shim'oni* Jeremiah 312; see Jacob Mann, *The Bible as Read and Preached in the Old Synagogue* (New York: Ktav, 1971) 171 [Hebrew section].

¹⁴See my *In Potiphar's House*, 117–18.

¹⁵Above, note 12.

descendants in time to come.¹⁶ And so, our midrash specifies that the angels that Jacob saw were, in turn, the guardian angels of Babylon, Media, Greece, and Rome. The seventy rungs that the guardian angel of Babylon ascends represent the seventy years of the Babylonian captivity as specified in Jer 25:11–12, 29:10 and later Jewish writings; the number of rungs ascended by the guardians of Media and Greece similarly corresponds to traditional chronology.¹⁷

The same motif apparently underlies the *Ladder of Jacob*. Here too, it is Jacob's vision of the ladder that serves as the vehicle for a revelation of the "kings of the lawless nations" who will rule over Israel, and if this text does not specifically mention how many such nations there will be,¹⁸ it does go on to speak (as we have seen) of *four* "ascents" or "descents" that will bring Jacob's progeny to grief. Indeed, the continuation of our text alludes specifically to the last of the four empires, Rome: "The Most High will raise up kings from the grandsons of your brother Esau, and they will receive the nobles of the tribes of the earth who will have maltreated your seed."¹⁹ As is well known, Esau frequently represents Rome in Second Temple writings.²⁰

Thus, there does appear to be a connection between the midrash of the Four Guardian Angels and the vision of the *Ladder of Jacob*, with its lawless kings and the four ascents/descents. The "fours" in both the midrash

¹⁶Indeed, this midrash gives a new coloring to the words of the biblical text, "And your progeny will be like the dust of the earth, and you will extend westward and eastward, north and south" (Gen 28:14)—these words are no longer a prediction of Israel's expansion and power but of its subjection and dispersion. What Jacob sees in the vision of the ladder is his own descendants' exile and subsequent domination by foreign peoples. Similarly, "I will be with you and guard you wherever you shall go" (Gen 28:15) now sounds like a divine assurance that, despite the terrible times to come, Israel will never be completely abandoned. No wonder, then, that the biblical text says about Jacob when he awakens from this vision, "And he was afraid and said, 'How fearsome is this place!'" (Gen 28:17).

¹⁷For these figures in rabbinic tradition, see *Seder 'Olam Rabba*, 29, 30 (ed. Baer Rattner; 2 vols. in 1; Vilna: Romm, 1894–97) 2. 133, 141; cf. *b. Meg.* 12a and parallels. Note also Flusser, "Four Empires," 319. One late version of this midrash specifies that the Roman period of domination is to last five hundred years; see Mann, *The Bible as Read and Preached*, 171.

¹⁸It says that there will be twelve periods and twenty-four kings, but it does not say how many "lawless nations of this age" there are.

¹⁹*Lad. Jac.* 5.12.

²⁰See Ginzberg, *Legends*, 5. 272; Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ* (rev. and ed. Geza Vermes and Fergus Millar; 3 vols.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1973–87) 3. 320 n. 78; Gerson Cohen, "Esau as a Symbol in Early Medieval Thought," in Alexander Altmann, ed., *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967) 19–48. For some historical background of this idea, see Bruce Cresson, "The Condemning of Edom in Postexilic Judaism," in James M. Efird, ed., *The Use of the Old Testament in the New* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1972) 125–48. The equation of Esau with Rome may ultimately derive from the associations of the Idumaeans (that is, Edomite) King Herod with Rome.

and the *Ladder of Jacob* seem, in turn, to derive from the four empires in the book of Daniel—and rather mechanically so; perhaps, as others have suggested, the “four empires” theme had simply become a commonplace by the late Second Temple period.²¹ For, when one thinks about it, the notion of four empires or ascents/descents is singularly inappropriate in the context of Jacob’s dream. *If one starts counting from the time of Jacob, there are six different kingdoms that will oppress Israel or exile it from its homeland.* Thus, Egypt, where the people of Israel were enslaved and held captive until the time of Moses, should have figured in Jacob’s revelation; so should Assyria, which conquered and exiled the inhabitants of the northern kingdom in the eighth century. Daniel, who is said to have lived at the time of the Babylonian exile, had no need of a revelation concerning these events, since they had already taken place. But this is not true of Jacob. It thus seems that this theme in both the midrash cited and the *Ladder of Jacob* arose out of a straightforward, if not entirely appropriate, projection of Daniel’s vision of the four beasts back to the time of Jacob; the four beasts are transformed into (four) “angels of God” said to go up and down Jacob’s ladder. Not only did this act of projection now provide a suitable message for a dream-vision that otherwise seemed needlessly involved, but the ladder, because of its association (witnessed above in Philo) with the ups and downs of life, was an ideal vehicle for a revelation about the rise and fall of empires.

We may now be in a better position to decide between the two manuscript possibilities in the *Ladder of Jacob*, “ascents” and “descents,” as well as to understand a few other ambiguities in the text. The ascents/descents problem derives, in my opinion, from the fact that *both* words were probably used in the original text. That text, I believe, must have read as follows:

Then he [the angel] said to me [Jacob]: . . . The ladder is this age, and twelve steps are the periods of this age, and the twenty-four faces are the kings of the lawless nations of this age. Under these kings the children of your children and the generations of your sons will be tested; they [the kings] will rise up because of the wickedness of your offspring. And they will make this place empty by four *ascents* because of the sins of your offspring. And upon the property of your forefathers a palace will be built, a temple in the name of your God and your fathers’ [God], but in anger against your children it will be made deserted, until the fourth *descent* of this age.²²

²¹See above, note 11. Flusser (“Four Ascents”) traces the roots of this conception and its broad diffusion in late antiquity.

²²The manuscripts offer a variety of different readings of this last phrase and, in the absence of a critical edition, it is difficult to assess their interrelationship. The above reading is attested in the Rumiantsev Palaia (1494). (See Lunt, *Ladder of Jacob*, 402, for a description of this manuscript).

Ascents are normally a positive thing and descents usually negative; it is easy to understand how someone might naturally conclude that Jacob's homeland would be made desolate by "descents," downturns, rather than the opposite. However, within the midrash of the guardian angels, an ascent by one of the four angels (and the empire that each represents) is a downturn for Israel. Therefore, the original version of the *Ladder of Jacob* must indeed have specified that "this place" would be made desolate by four *ascents*. On the other hand, a downturn for the last angel means an end to Israel's troubles; therefore, the text specifies that the process will go on until the fourth *descent*, that is, until the Roman empire in turn begins its decline.

"This place," incidentally, is not Bethel but Jerusalem. The fact that the Bible itself identifies the locale of Jacob's dream as the "house of God" and the "gateway of heaven" (Gen 28:17) was sufficient to bring early interpreters to overlook the toponyms "Bethel" and "Luz" in the narrative (Gen 28:19) and claim that in fact Jacob dreamt his dream on the future site of David's temple.²³ That this site in particular will be "made desolate" by the rise of the four empires thus has a certain sense: not only were the people of Jerusalem exiled by the Babylonians and the city made to "sit desolate" (Lam 1:1), but the evils of domination by successor empires were to prove no less disastrous for the city which was the center of Jewish piety and the focus of Jewish aspirations.

■ Conflicting Motifs

There is still a problem, however, with associating the vision as explained in the *Ladder of Jacob* with the midrash of the Four Guardian Angels. The four ascents and descents mentioned in the the *Ladder of Jacob* seem somewhat at odds with the remaining details of Jacob's vision there, the twelve steps (or rungs) of the ladder and the images of the twenty-four lawless kings. In the midrash of the ascending and descending guardian angels, the steps merely symbolize numbers of years, and presumably there could be hundreds of them; each angel goes up a certain number and then goes back down again, corresponding to the number of years that its country will hold political domination before falling back down to earth. In the *Ladder of Jacob*, on the contrary, there are precisely twelve steps and twenty-four rulers; each pair of rulers is connected to a particular step, that is, a particular time-frame in the succession of "periods." *These* steps, in other words, seem to symbolize the "staircase of history," on which motion goes in only one direction, upward, passing from one period and its

²³See *Gen. R.* 69.7 (eds. Yehudah Theodor and Hanokh Albeck; 2d. ed.; Jerusalem: Wahrman, 1965) 796 (notes); *Pirqei de-Rabbi Eli'ezer* 35.

rulers to the next. Moving back down on such a ladder would make no sense, since it would mean moving backward in time.

From the standpoint of the biblical text, the midrash of the Four Guardian Angels works perfectly: the angels of Jacob's dream are the guardians of four empire-nations, and their ascending and descending therefore symbolizes the rise and fall of their respective empires. From the same standpoint, the picture presented in the *Ladder of Jacob* appears confused. It echoes the four angels idea in its mention of four ascents and descents, but these ascents/descents take place on a different sort of ladder, not one of interchangeable years, but one representing the staircase of history. What sense can the four ascents *and descents* have on a ladder of periods that succeed one another? And in any case, if these ascents represent the ascents of the four empires, then why are there also precisely twelve periods and twenty-four kings? Are these to be divided among the four empires—and if so, in what proportions? It seems as if there are too many numbers here, too many conflicting symbols. For that reason, it may be worthwhile to consider the possibility that the *Ladder of Jacob*, like so many ancient texts that retell or explain biblical stories, actually embodies a conflation of two different, originally quite separate, explanations of Jacob's dream. Perhaps—as in fact often happens in the history of biblical exegesis—an earlier version of a text containing one motif later came to be supplemented with a second motif taken from elsewhere.²⁴

A close examination of the *Ladder of Jacob* suggests that this might indeed be the case. For, it is a striking fact that there is no mention of the four ascents in the initial description of Jacob's dream vision in chapter 1. There, Jacob sees the ladder with the twelve steps and twenty-four faces, but nothing is said about four ascents. The first and last time that these ascents are mentioned is in chapter 5, when the *angelus interpres* comes to explain to Jacob the significance of what he has seen. This fact in itself seems strange. How can the angel in chapter 5 be explaining four things in Jacob's vision that are nowhere mentioned in the initial description of that vision?

Moreover, if one eliminates the sentences dealing with these four ascents along with the passage that follows detailing the evils of the last of the four, Esau's (=Rome's) empire, the result is a smoothly flowing narrative:

Then he [the angel] said to me [Jacob]: . . . The ladder is this age, and twelve steps are the periods of this age, and the twenty-four faces are the kings of the lawless nations of this age. Under these kings the children of your children and the generations of your sons will be

²⁴I have discussed this phenomenon at some length in *In Potiphar's House*, 38–39, 134–35, 145–52.

tested; they [the kings] will rise up because of the wickedness of your offspring. [Section on four ascents and sons of Esau. Then:] Know, Jacob, that your descendants shall be exiles in a strange land, they will afflict them with slavery and inflict wounds on them every day. But the Lord will judge the people for whom they slave.²⁵

That the narrative flows smoothly is in itself some indication that the omitted passage is a later insertion; it is quite rare that one can excise a brief passage such as this one from a text without somehow disturbing its flow. Indeed, the beginning of verse 16 (“Know, Jacob. . .”) looks suspiciously like a narrative resumption, that is, a phrase or sentence specifically created so as to return the narrative back to where it was before the insertion was made. Thus, while the sentence just before the putative insertion says that Jacob’s descendants will suffer at the hands of foreign kings, the sentence in verse 16 (coming just after the putative insertion) asserts that Jacob’s descendants will be exiled and afflicted.

The passage cited above contains yet another indication that something has been inserted: there is a slight contradiction between the vision of the four ascents and the surrounding text. For, while these four are not identified specifically in the *Ladder of Jacob*, they are identified in the corresponding midrash of Samuel b. Nahman, as well as in numerous other Second Temple texts,²⁶ as Babylon, Media, Greece, and Rome, and the fact that there are four ascents in the *Ladder of Jacob* (rather than six) points as well to, specifically, *these* four. (That the last of the four is apparently Rome has already been pointed out.) Now, as we have seen, the mention of these four ascents in the *Ladder of Jacob* is not entirely appropriate to the time of Jacob and his vision; Egypt and Assyria should also have been included. Yet the words that follow the four ascents section do indeed allude to Egypt: “Know, Jacob, that your descendants shall be exiles in a strange land, they will afflict them with *slavery* and inflict wounds on them every day. But the Lord will judge the people for whom they *slave*.” Not only is slavery a unique feature of the Egyptian exile, but the second sentence cited appears patently designed to recall God’s words to Abraham *about Egypt*, “Yet I will judge the people for whom they will slave” (Gen 15:14).²⁷ In other words, while the “fourness” of the four ascents seems to eliminate Egypt as part of this revelation of the future, the text elsewhere seems to assume that the period of Egyptian slavery is indeed part of what is being revealed.²⁸

²⁵*Lad. Jac.* 5:1–6; 16–17.

²⁶See above, note 11.

²⁷Note also that the phrase “exiles in a strange land” seems intended to echo Moses’ words in the exodus narrative “I have been a sojourner in a strange land” (Exod 2:22).

²⁸Egyptian slavery and the events of the exodus are further alluded to in *Lad. Jac.* 6:9–11.

■ The Twelve Steps

For all these reasons, it seems likely to me that the motif of the four ascents in the *Ladder of Jacob* is in fact an interpolation. The interpolator, a copyist or editor of the original text of the *Ladder of Jacob*, knew the midrash of the four ascents (that is, the Four Guardian Angels motif). This midrash cleverly accounted for the angels ascending and descending on the ladder and had perhaps therefore acquired a certain authority as *the* explanation; it simply had to be included in the old text even if only by an oblique, passing reference to four ascents. Such reference was inserted, along with some sentences condemning the Roman empire, into the present chapter 5. In accomplishing this, however, the interpolator neglected to insert a corresponding reference to the four ascents/descents in the account of the initial vision in chapter 1, nor did he notice the dissonance created by the reference to *four* ascents/descents when, elsewhere, one of Israel's future oppressors is specified as Egypt, which was not one of the traditional four empires. The interpolation, in other words, was somewhat botched, but, smoothed out by the narrative resumption seen earlier, these defects became less than obvious.

This insertion, however, was made into a text that already contained its own, rather different, explanation of Jacob's dream vision. What can be deduced about this original exegetical motif (to which we might refer, in contrast to the Four Guardian Angels motif, as the Staircase of History motif)?

In order to understand this other motif, we must begin again with the biblical text. Jacob sees a ladder in his dream and is frightened. What is frightening, this motif asserts, is *the ladder itself*: the ladder represents the coming ages of history, and Jacob sees the terrible things that lie in store for his descendents, the twenty-four lawless foreign kings who will hold sway over them, two in each future period. No wonder he says, "How fearsome is this place!" (Gen 28:17).

In this second motif, the fact that the Bible also mentions certain angels ascending and descending on the ladder is relatively unimportant; their traveling up and down future ages probably holds no particular significance for Jacob, save perhaps that, in the hard times to come, his progeny will be watched over and protected. The whole point is the frightening display of future times and future kings. Now, this idea of the display of future history does have certain obvious affinities with other Second Temple texts, many of which likewise conceive of time as divided up into a certain number (usually ten) of periods or units.²⁹ But there is another exegetical

²⁹Daniel speaks of 70 weeks of years (490 years), which is the equivalent of ten jubilees (Dan 9:24); see Jozef Milik, *The Books of Enoch: Aramaic Fragments of Qumran Cave 4*

motif—once again connected to Jacob’s dream-vision and, once again, known from rabbinic midrash—which seems to presuppose a similar staircase, not a staircase of interchangeable years, but the staircase of history:

R. Berekhya and R. Helbo and R. Simeon b. Yosina: R. Meir explained the verse “Despite all this they still sinned; they did not believe despite his miracles” (Ps 78:32). This refers to Jacob who did not believe and did not ascend [the ladder]. God said to him: Jacob, if you had believed and gone up, you would never have had to go down again; but now, since you have not believed and have not gone up, your children will become entangled with nations and ensnared with empires, [and will go] from empire to empire, from Babylon to Media and from Media to Greece and from Greece to Rome. He said to him: Ruler of the universe, forever? Said God to him, “Do not fear, my servant Jacob, and do not be dismayed Israel” (Jer 30:10).³⁰

At first glance, this midrash might appear to be rather similar to the previous one: once again we have the ladder and the four empires. But here, strikingly, it is not the Four Guardian Angels who are to ascend the ladder, but Jacob himself. Unfortunately, Jacob loses his nerve; he does not sufficiently trust in God and so does not go up. As a result, his descendants will now become “ensnared with empires,” going from one to the next, “from Babylon to Media and from Media to Greece and from Greece to Rome.” With a bit of imagination, one might almost see these four empires as rungs on this ladder: Jacob’s descendants are to go (as the text says) “from empire to empire” by *climbing*, slowly making their way to the top. Is this

(Oxford: Clarendon, 1976) 254; see also Matthew Black, *The Book of Enoch or 1 Enoch* (Leiden: Brill, 1985) 288. The *Sibylline Oracles* speaks of ten periods (*Sib. Or.* 4.20–21, 47), as does *1 Enoch* 91.12–17; 11QMelch 2.7–8; and *Barn.* 4.4. On these ten periods, see Flusser, “Four Empires,” 331. *Tg. Sheni Esth.* 1:1, beginning, and *Pirqei de-Rabbi Eli’ezer* 11 both speak of ten kings whose reigns span all of human history (for the latter see the standard Warsaw edition [1852, reprinted many times], 28a and b). A number of Second Temple texts likewise speak of twelve periods or units, but there is no indication that they are based on a common tradition; twelve, like ten, was a conventional number, perhaps connected with the twelve months of the year and/or twelve hours of the day (compare the specific mention of “hours” in *1 Enoch* 89.72, *Apoc. Abr.* 30.2). The twelve periods of *1 Enoch* 89.72 seem to extend from the end of the Babylonian exile until Alexander the Great (compare Black, *1 Enoch*, 79, 273); our text’s twelve periods in “this age” may have been fashioned in accordance with this. 2 Bar 26:1–27:15 also speaks of future time being divided into twelve parts, but these are more precisely twelve stages of misfortune and not specific periods of time (contrast 28:1–2); nor are they connected with foreign rulers, as is made clear by 2 Bar 53:6 and chapters 56–70. Some versions of 4 Ezra 14:11–12 speak of the “age” being divided into twelve “periods”; see Stone, *Fourth Ezra*, 414, 420–21. *Apoc. Abr.* 29.2 also speaks of twelve “times” of this age; see Ryszard Rubinkiewicz, *L’apocalypse d’Abraham en vieux slave* (Lublin: Société des Lettres et des Sciences de l’Université de Lublin, 1987) 191–93.

³⁰Mordecai Margulies, *Midrash Wayyiqra Rabbah* (5 vols. in 2; New York and Jerusalem: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1993) 671–72. For other versions, see above n. 13.

not in fact the point of the text's saying that Jacob's descendants will become "entangled" and "ensnared"—that they will be impeded in their climb? The implication seems to be that, had Jacob trusted in God, he himself would have gotten over these rungs unscathed. But since he did not believe, it is his descendants who will have to start from the bottom of this ladder, and they will not have so easy a time.

Some support for this view is offered by the verse cited at the end of this passage, "Do not fear, my servant Jacob, and do not be dismayed Israel" (Jer 30:10). The word normally translated as "dismayed" here, *תחת*, can be understood to derive from *נחת*, meaning "go down," "descend" (and not from *חתת*, "dismay"). This is precisely the playful switch being proposed by this midrash. For, by substituting this other meaning, the midrashist can make God out to be telling "Israel" (that is, Jacob's descendants) *not to go down*, not to be discouraged by the long climb that lies before them.³¹ But this pun only underlines the fact that, in this motif, it is the ladder itself that frightens Jacob, and that first Jacob, and then Israel, Jacob's descendants (and *not* the four empires or their guardian angels), are the ones who are to climb. The four empires are, on the contrary, what will entangle and ensnare Jacob's descendants, apparently, as they climb "from Babylon to Media and from Media to Greece and from Greece to Rome"; if so, these empires would seem to be part of the ladder itself.

■ Which Came First?

Thus, even within the rabbinic tradition these two fundamentally different approaches to understanding Jacob's dream appear to have coexisted. Both approaches successfully explain what was frightening about the dream, the vision of the future that it presented, and both accounted for the principal prop of the dream, the ladder, in similar ways: the steps represent units of time. These resemblances might well indicate that one approach derived from the other. Even if this is true, however, the two approaches as they developed ultimately became irreconcilable. The steps can represent (interchangeable) years in the first approach, in which case the (guardian) angels' ascending and descending is explained as indicating what a particular empire's "high point" will be—that is, its maximum number of years—much as a thermometer on a hot day. Or the steps can represent specific periods of years *in succession*, in which case the angels' motion up and down is essentially meaningless; what is significant about this second type

³¹Indeed, this midrash apparently seeks to locate the two halves of Jer 30:10 in two different time-frames: "Do not fear, my servant Jacob," was uttered by God when he first showed Jacob the ladder and asked him to climb it. But Jacob lost his nerve, and so the second half of the verse, "and do not be dismayed Israel"—in the sense of "And do not go down, Israel"—was then uttered by God to Jacob's descendants.

of ladder is Jacob's (or Israel's) contemplation of the frightening prospect of climbing the rungs of future history. But the two conceptions of the ladder cannot work together; those who climb the one cannot climb the other.

Given the likelihood that one motif derived from the other, one might ask which of the two came first. I believe that the evidence points fairly unambiguously to the Staircase of History motif. First, we have seen that this motif forms the bulk of the *Ladder of Jacob*; the four ascents/descents are only briefly interpolated into chapter 5, apparently as something of an afterthought. This would suggest that the Staircase of History motif was in existence before the other had been created. Secondly, the Four Guardian Angels motif is simply a better midrash: it makes use of both elements in Jacob's dream, the ladder and the angels, while the Staircase of History motif only uses the first. While it is not an inviolable rule, the general tendency in exegesis seems to be that a new motif enters into circulation only when it is perceived as being better than the motif it proposes to supplant or supplement. If this is so, the Staircase of History motif could hardly have been created after the exegetically superior Four Guardian Angels.

But beyond these two considerations, there is a third, still more compelling, argument. When, after all, was the Four Guardian Angels motif created? In both the midrash of Samuel b. Nahman and in the *Ladder of Jacob*, the last imperial dominator of Israel is, unambiguously, the Roman empire. Clearly, then, this motif must belong (at the very earliest) to the period of rising Roman power in the region. Indeed, in the *Ladder of Jacob*, the angel tells Jacob that "this place"—Jerusalem, or at least the site of the Jerusalem temple—will be made "desolate" or "empty" until the fourth descent. Such a formulation points at least to a date after the destruction of that temple in 70 CE, and perhaps even to the period after the Bar Kokhba rebellion.

The same cannot be said for the Staircase of History motif. For, the basic conception underlying this motif is that each and every period³² to come has its "lawless" foreign powers; Jacob will simply have to go on being dominated by one or another of them until he comes to the end of "this age." It is difficult for me to imagine that such a motif could have been created in the wake of the destruction of the temple in 70 CE, a cataclysmic event that overshadowed anything since the Babylonian conquest of 586/7 BCE. A midrashist would hardly want to claim that such a

³²The Slavonic here simply has *vrēmēna* ("times"); Lunt (*OTP* 2. 409 n. 5a) credibly theorizes that this word stands for the Greek *καίροι* ("times"). This word may represent such Hebrew words as תְּקוּפָה ("circuit, season") or זֶמַן ("season"), but I suspect the original word was קָר ("period"), as in, for example, 4Q181. (See Stone, *Fourth Ezra*, 213 n. 45.)

cataclysm was merely one more step on the staircase, comparable to the other eleven.³³ For this reason, along with the previous two, it seems to me that the Staircase of History must be the older motif, and that it predates the destruction of the Jerusalem temple.

But how early can this motif be? Previous attempts to date the *Ladder of Jacob* have all fixed on the references to Rome in chapter 5 in order to conclude that the text as a whole must derive from the first century CE at the earliest. However, if I am correct in believing that *Lad. Jac.* 5:7–16a is in fact an interpolation, then there is no reason to connect the entire text to that period specifically. Many apocalypses and biblical retellings have survived from earlier periods; there is no reason a priori to conclude that the original text of the *Ladder of Jacob* is late.

Indeed, there is one striking element about the Staircase of History motif: it does not seem to envisage any period of political independence. Babylonians, Persians, Medians—somehow, the lawless nations will always be pushing Jacob’s descendants around. On each of the twelve steps that correspond to the periods of “this age” there are always *foreign* rulers who will dominate Israel. I find it difficult to believe that such a motif could have been created after the Maccabean revolt and the period of Hasmonean independence. What Jewish author after that time (no matter what his political allegiance) could conceive of Israel’s history as an unbroken series of basically comparable steps, each characterized by its “lawless” outside rulers?

For this reason, it seems to me that one ought to consider the possibility that the Staircase of History motif is actually rather old, antedating the Maccabees and even those events in the reign of Antiochus IV that immediately preceded them. Such a motif might have developed at a time when Israel’s history in “this age” did indeed seem to be an unbroken story of one foreign ruler after another, Persian, Ptolemaic, and perhaps Seleucid, with no one of them particularly better or worse than the last. There is no disputing that, even in pre-Maccabean times, Jews were interpreting scripture by means of such motifs: similar bits of midrashic elaboration of the biblical text are found, for example, in the books of Judith, Ben Sira, and Jubilees, all of which belong to the same period.³⁴ Of course, it may be that the original motif is post-Maccabean, but then one would have to account for the twenty-four *foreign* rulers in “this age.” A post-70 CE date seems

³³Indeed, it was precisely because the destruction of the temple by the Romans had been so cataclysmic that the Four Guardian Angels motif was created. Its message was that, despite the cataclysm, one should not despair: both Jacob and Daniel had foreseen four empires, and Rome is thus the last of the four—its fall will eventually come as well.

³⁴I have discussed the historical background and given some examples in *Early Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986).

to me still less likely, not only because Rome would hardly be presented as merely another step on the staircase but because, apart from the interpolated passage, there is nothing in this text that even remotely alludes to Rome.³⁵ Given the text's central focus on Jacob, its Ur-version's failure to allude not only to Rome itself, but to Jacob's brother Esau as the Roman archetype, would seem rule out any date during the period of Roman ascendancy.³⁶

■ How the *Ladder of Jacob* Was Composed

We are now in a position to try to retrace the steps that led up to the composition of the *Ladder of Jacob* as we know it. Faced with the question of the significance of Jacob's dream, and in particular his frightened reaction to it, an ancient author came up with the staircase of history idea: what Jacob saw was the succession of outside kings under whom his descendants would be forced to live. It seems that this basic notion—that Jacob was being shown in the vision of the ladder something of his descendants' future history—first developed out of the words spoken to Jacob after the vision itself, in particular those of Gen 28:14-15, where God mentions Jacob's "offspring" and then assures him that he will be returned "to this land." With a little imagination, this might well sound as if Jacob had been shown his descendants' future exile(s) and return(s)—not only the coming exile of Jacob's sons to Egypt, but the future Babylonian exile as well, indeed, all the ups and downs of future Jewish history. Such was the frightening glimpse that Jacob's vision afforded. (The whole idea that this dream was a vision *of the future* was probably also influenced by the revelation to Abraham in Gen 15:12-17, which specifically mentioned the coming exile to Egypt;

³⁵This is not the only reason why I feel compelled to reject Rubinkiewicz's proposal (*L'Apolcalypse d'Abraham*, 73-74) that the twenty-four faces correspond to the twelve Roman emperors from Pompey to Vespasian, each represented on his step along with a bust of the goddess Rome. Surely this is midrash on midrash. If the text had intended to represent these twelve, then it would simply have said that there were twelve steps each corresponding to a different ruler (and not to a different "period"), or would have said that each step had a single face on it. As for the reference to the kingdoms of Edom and Moab in *Lad. Jac.* 6.15, it is to be understood in the light of the tradition documented by Cresson ("The Condemning of Edom" 125-48). Edom here is certainly not Rome—for if so, who is Moab?—but both nations symbolize Israel's eschatological enemy whose destruction will, according to the oracles of Obadiah, Jeremiah 48-49, and Isaiah 34 and 63, mark the dawn of the new age (just as will the destruction of the Leviathan and the "lawless Falcon" in *Lad. Jac.* 6.13).

³⁶The passing reference to Esau in *Lad. Jac.* 4.4 reinforces this conclusion: surely here was an opportunity to say "Esau the wicked," "my cruel brother," that is, something that would certainly have imposed itself *after* Rome had begun to rule in Jerusalem. Yet there is no such reference here.

Abraham's vision was likewise elaborated by early exegetes to include other, later, events in Jewish history.)³⁷

In any case, this author had to create a frightening staircase and, principally for that purpose, came up with the notion of the kings' faces eerily adorning each of the twelve steps. The original textual feature that led to these heads adorning the ladder is actually found in Gen 28:12, which speaks of a ladder whose "top" reached to the heavens. The word "top"—*ראש* in Hebrew, the same word as "head"—generated the idea that the ladder in fact had a human head at its summit. So it is in the *Ladder of Jacob*:

He had a dream. And behold, a ladder was fixed on the earth, whose "head" [that is, *ראש*] reached to heaven. And the "head" of the ladder was the face of a man, carved out of fire.³⁸

In the *Ladder of Jacob*, this one head is then supplemented by the twenty-four kingly heads, making the whole thing an extremely fearsome apparition.

³⁷Indeed, some of these elaborations attribute to Abraham, as to Jacob, a vision of the four empires. The justification for this association is the mention of the fourth generation in Gen 15:16. For this fourth generation seemed somewhat at odds with the four hundred years mentioned by God a few verses earlier as the time of Israelite enslavement in Egypt in Gen 15:13; it seemed likely to ancient interpreters that the fourth generation referred to something else. Since the book of Daniel had foreseen the succession of four empires that will hold sway over Israel, it seemed possible to some that the fourth generation mentioned here might be connected with the four empires. Perhaps what God had shown Abraham was the rise and fall of those four empires, after which the the fourth generation (that is, the fourth generation of Jews to survive the fall of a foreign empire) would "return" once more to be sovereign in their homeland. This motif appears in the *Apoc. Abr.* 27.3, 28.4–5: "[Abraham says:] And behold, I saw four ascents coming upon them [my progeny], and how they [the nations] burned the Temple with fire and carried off the sacred things that were there. . . . And [God] showed me the multitude of His people and said to me [Abraham], 'Because of this, my anger will be [kindled] against them through the four ascents that you saw, and through these will come retribution for their deeds.'" The same motif appears in *Targ. Neofiti* Gen 15:12: "And the sun was about to set and a sweet sleep fell on Abraham and behold, Abraham saw four empires rising against him, 'fear,' that is Babylon, 'darkness,' that is Media, 'great,' that is Greece, 'falling,' that is [evil Rome, which is destined to fall and rise no more]." This motif likewise appears in a tannaitic source: "He [also] showed him [Abraham] the four kingdoms that were destined to enslave his descendants, as it says, 'And the sun was about to set and a deep sleep fell on Abraham, and behold, fear and great darkness falling upon him' [Gen 15:12]. 'Fear' is the kingdom of Babylon, 'darkness' is the kingdom of Media, 'great' is the kingdom of Greece, 'falling' is the fourth kingdom, wicked Rome" (*Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishma'el Bahodesh* 9). Note further 4 Ezra 3:14, *Gen. R.* 44.15, and Philo *Quis rerum divinarum haeres* 249–306.

³⁸*Lad. Jac.* 1.3–4; see my discussion in *In Potiphar's House*, 117–19. The idea that the angels were not ascending and descending upon *it* (that is, the ladder) but upon *him* (that is, Jacob) is reflected in various rabbinic texts as well as John 1:52: "And he said, 'Truly, truly I say to you, you will see the heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the son of man.'" See again my *In Potiphar's House*, 112–15.

tion—certainly one that justified Jacob's frightened reaction in the biblical narrative. Exactly what the significance of the numbers twelve and twenty-four might be in the *Ladder of Jacob* is not clear. As I have suggested, twelve elsewhere appears to be a conventional figure in visions of the future (rather than representing a single tradition shared by the various texts in which it appears); the twelve here may thus simply be derived from the other twelves commonly found in time calculation, the twelve months of the year or the twelve hours in a day.³⁹ In any event, the division of future time into specific periods surely represents the common Second Temple attempt to make sense of the "messiness of history" by asserting that there is some order to it after all—as with the seven groups of seventy in Dan 9:24 or the chronological jubilees in the *Book of Jubilees*.

The Staircase of History motif may well have existed long before it acquired the particular form in which it appears in the *Ladder of Jacob*. In any case, its basic idea—that Jacob saw a frightening vision of steps representing the future periods of domination that would have to be surmounted by his descendants—probably circulated orally, and in varying forms, both before and after the *Ladder of Jacob* was written. At a certain point this exegetical motif acquired a new embellishment, the addition of Jer 30:10 in the sense of "Don't worry and *don't go down*." Now Jacob would not only contemplate the frightening spectacle of future ages, but God would order him to climb the ladder and so, symbolically, inaugurate the Jewish people's journey through history. Jacob would hesitate, only to be reassured by Jeremiah's words. In this form (or a slightly modified one, as we have seen) the motif survived into rabbinic writings; the punchline was too precious to give up even after the original framework, the Staircase of History, had been abandoned.

And abandoned it was; once the idea of the Four Guardian Angels came along, this new motif was recognized as better midrash, and the first notion all but disappeared. That this new motif is transmitted in rabbinic texts in the name of a late third-century *amora* may or may not be significant; the motif itself might well go back to the second or even first century. What is surely significant, however, is that the interpolator of this motif into the *Ladder of Jacob* likewise felt constrained to add something about the Roman Empire, *to which he found no allusion in the original text*. A text centering on Jacob which made no mention of his wicked brother, ancestor of Rome, simply seemed defective to this interpolator, and so the anti-Esau material was inserted alongside.

³⁹The twelve months are, of course, an extremely ancient notion; while there is no biblical evidence of the twelve hours, this idea is well attested in tannaitic sources as well as in a few earlier, Second Temple texts. See above, note 29.

I have spoken of the original form of the *Ladder of Jacob* as having existed as written text and not merely as an orally transmitted motif; that is, the four ascents section of the *Ladder of Jacob* was inserted into a preexisting *document*. The interpolator failed to mention the four ascents in the initial description of the dream—something that most probably would not have happened if we were dealing with a single author bent on harmonizing two separate motifs with which he was familiar. Moreover, the whole section dealing with these ascents and, specifically, the Roman empire (*Lad. Jac.* 5:7-16) can be removed without disturbing the flow of the narrative; here is a sure sign of interpolation into an existing text rather than a mere blending or confusion of ideas in the mind of a single author.

Nor was this the last interpolation to be made in the *Ladder of Jacob*. As many scholars have noted, it was a still later author, a Christian, who added chapter 7 to this earlier, Jewish work. However, if one peels away all these later layers, one is left with a document that arguably belongs among the earliest exegetical works of the “rewritten Bible” genre. In the present article I have tried to account for its basic form, but many other items—in particular, the mysterious names that appear in various places in this work, as well as one or two historical references—await further clarification.